

“New Life” – John 3:1-17 – Lent 2 – Feb 20/05

I’ve had another difficult lesson to learn lately. It’s not a new lesson – I have a bunch of scar tissue from learning it before, so you think I would know better. The lesson? It’s the lesson that email is a dangerous medium of communication because unlike voice, or even more so face-to-face talking, email does not convey any emotional clues other than the words themselves, and the words can so easily lead to a misinterpretation by the reader, a misreading of the sender’s emotions. Twice, in as many weeks, I have written an email while I was writing a sermon, and/or drafting a policy document. When I’m doing either of those tasks, I am in a highly analytical mode, and one result is that the emails I write at the same time are much longer than usual, full of analysis, interpretation and conclusion. Two recipients – actually a whole bunch of recipients because in the first case I was writing to a whole group of people, namely the Synod Executive – all of the recipients immediately thought I was either angry or upset. I haven’t the heart to tell them that if I am truly angry or upset they probably won’t hear from me, because I have learned not to write while in those states.

But even a face-to-face encounter is still not a guarantee of good, clear and effective communication. And miscommunication is nothing new, either. The inability to comprehend, or just plain misunderstandings, were at least as common in Jesus’ day as they are now. And just in case you think that education and training make a difference, take a peek at that conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, so we know that he was as highly educated as anyone could have been in those days, schooled and proficient in Scripture, Theology and even Law. This Nicodemus was no fool. He even knew enough to approach Jesus secretly, “under cover” so to speak, which is a better understanding of the word translated “at night”. He was astute enough to understand that if his declaration to Jesus, “you are from God”, were to be leaked to the press there would be a mighty uproar, and he would lose his cushy job. Just to get a feeling for the controversial nature of this rendezvous between Nicodemus and Jesus, and his declaration “we know you are from God”, public knowledge of that meeting would have been roughly the same as we could expect from an expose about Condaleeza Rice holding a secret conference with Abu Zakouwi to discuss in a friendly way American Foreign Policy.

Even so, Nicodemus had an incomplete or inadequate understanding of who Jesus was, and the role he had come to play. Jesus, in good rabbinical style, toyed with him at an intellectual level, calling for birth “from above”, which Nicodemus hears as being physically born “again”. Jesus reveals his ‘gotcha’ of Nicodemus by going on to explain the nature of what he meant by a birth “from above”, a new life born of the waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit. It is pretty clear from Nicodemus’ answer, “how can this be?”, that he still didn’t get it, that he still didn’t understand, and that he went on his way still confused.

We shouldn’t be too hard on poor old Nicodemus in his confusion, for he would not be the only one, because the confusion over this issue would last a long, long time. Some confusion certainly lasted at least until the time John wrote his gospel, because in order to help clear things up he added part of a later, post-Easter sermon to try to explain what Jesus meant. Note that at verse 7 the text shifts from the singular “you / I” of the Jesus and Nicodemus conversation to the plural “you / we” of a larger (and later) audience, now linking Christian baptism with the Holy Spirit, and referring to Christ’s ascension as a past event. A covert, in-the-cover-of-darkness conversation between two individuals moves to a presentation of two widely divergent perspectives on life before God. One perspective understands faith as the acting out of proof texts, following prescribed behaviours, displaying defined patterns of faithful obedience on a long and arduous climb into the kingdom of God. The other insists that life in the kingdom is a gift given by God, unobtainable any other way than by accepting the gift, a gift not controlled by humans but instead blown to and fro by the Holy Spirit of

God. As the theologian Fred Craddock puts it, “the shift from succeeding at religion to having eternal life [given freely] is as radical as being born anew.” But the message itself is not new. God’s grace is not something new, as though he had somehow mellowed over the ages. His grace was evident even in ancient times, as early as the defining moment of the Exodus. It is important to remember that God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt first – then afterwards presented the Law through Moses. This text proclaims what has always been true of God, and what is comforting again: God loves the world; God desires that none perish; God gives the Son that all may live; God has acted in Christ not to condemn but to save.

The burning question that still hangs in the air after Nicodemus’ confused exit is, then, what does this new life look like? The furor and heated dialogue about whether the rebirth with water and the Spirit is ‘again’ or ‘from above’ is a futile and meaningless diversion. The real question is, what does this new life look like?

And to that question, unfortunately for some avid groups, there is no one single ‘right’ answer. There is no divine cookie-cutter that stamps out certified, genuine rebirthed Christians. The gifts of the Spirit are given in as many ways as there are people, and the tasks to which we are called in the Spirit are as varied as the personalities that respond. There are some common characteristics that are displayed in this new life in the Spirit, and they are recognized as the results, as the fruit of the Spirit. While Paul says to the congregation at Galatia, “the works of the flesh are obvious ...”, he continues, “by contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

What then does this mean for us here at Central – as part of the body of Christ, reborn of water and the Spirit, what will this new life look like for us? We can’t be sure of the specifics, but we can be assured of the ‘new’ part, that we will continue to change and be changed by the Spirit moving in us, inviting, urging, prodding and encouraging us to respond to calls to specific actions, specific ministries. We have seen some of that happen over the past several years – the breakfast ministry, still going strong; the hospital visitation team, with some new members; a shared ministry with two other congregations, Galilee Korean and Christ Alive; the International Student Ministry in its various forms. As I mentioned last week, we recently received full funding for the first phase of the Hummingbird Ministry, and that continues to blossom and grow. Recently the Session agreed to help a new ministry that Sue Breisch is working to build called Families in Recovery, a program to help new mothers who are victims of addiction bond with their newborns and start a new life of parenthood. What’s next? – I’m sometimes afraid to ask, but excited about the possibilities at the same time.

Of course all this new life has and will continue to have an impact on us as a congregation – there’s more demand on our resources in terms of space and time, there’s more work and we may well have to change the way we do some administration, but there is also an increased sense of being alive. Just as when you are involved in some increased physical activity like jogging the heart rate increases and the breathing deepens, as we continue to become more fully engaged in this new life in Christ there is a stronger throbbing heartbeat within and among us, and we are indeed breathing deeply in the Spirit. Both as individuals and together as a part of the body of Christ, isn’t it great to be alive?! Thanks be to God for the gift of new life in Christ through water and the Spirit.